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ABSTRACT

Noting that even one caring adult can help make a child more capable of handling later stressors, this paper lists some strategies for building a sense of specialness in young children in group care contexts. Also presented are ways to enhance optimism and combat attitudes of helplessness and pessimism among children. The paper outlines a pattern of effective adaptation in the environment that includes four points: cognitive and intellectual functioning, attachment relationships, self-efficacy, and self-regulation. The paper lists the best and worst caregiving modes for competence-building, and infancy/preschool developmental tasks associated with competence. The characteristics of resilient children are grouped by individual, family, and extrafamilial traits. Finally, the paper discusses the importance of establishing a good start in early development for competence-building. (Contains 16 references.) (JPB)

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Fostering Competence: Lessons from Research on Successful Children

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This paper explores some strategies for building a sense of specialness in children in group care contexts. It will also explore ways to enhance optimism and combat attitudes of helplessness and pessimism.

Even one caring adult can help make a child more capable of handling later stressors. The brain is very resilient, and tends to maintain an even course even in the face of the most outrageous experiences. That's why most children born in conditions of poverty and violence develop normally. Scientists suspect that the reason some children, regardless of their social or economic status, develop problems may be that they are genetically more vulnerable to stress. Furthermore, their bad experiences are not neutralized by a caring parent or involved adult.

Research suggests that if there's somebody out there who makes you feel like you're special and important, then you can internalize that when you're developing your view of the world. When you look at children who come out of terrible environments and do well, you find that someone in their lives somehow instilled in them the attitude that they aren't helpless, that they aren't powerless, that they can do something.

Studies show that every dollar spent on early childhood development programs translates into saving approximately five dollars later in social services, mental health services, prisons, and other programs intended to deal with the aftermath of aggression and violence. Developmental experiences determine the capability of the brain to do things. Some argue that it you don't change those developmental experiences, society will end up having to build more prisons and hospitals.

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BUILDING COMPETENCE

Competence - a pattern of effective adaptation in the environment

1.Cognitive & Intellectual functioning
- Language skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Academic skills

2.Attachment relationships
- Means of obtaining needed help ("it's safe to seek out others")
- Emotional regulation until child learns to self-regulate ("contact feels good")
- Secure base from which to explore ("I can take risks and return later")

3.Self Efficacy
- Perceived ability, which influences use of latent skills
- BEST: Responsive environments permitting regular contingent success

4.Self-regulation
- Control over attention, emotion, and behavior
- Compliance and prosocial behavior

BEST for compliance, internalization, and self control:
- Caregiving style that is sensitive
- consistent rules
- high expectations
- authoritative

WORST, yielding low compliance & low internalization:
- power-assertive (esp with hostile effect)
- harsh, punitive, rejecting and inconsistent

Developmental Tasks (infancy-preschool)

- Attachment to caregivers
- Language Development
- Differentiate self from environment
- Self-control and compliance

  - practice motor skills
  - language usage
  - develop self-confidence
  - play
  - practice problem solving

Plasticity - how experience affects brain's structure and functioning

Mastery motivation - intrinsic pleasure associated with effective interactions with the environment

Self-efficacy - child's beliefs about the likelihood of their being successful at a task

Scaffolding - when a proficient adult gives children support and structure they need to perform at the growing edge of their capability (Vygotsky, 1978)

Kindling - when extreme stress and adversity sensitizes the developing nervous system, reducing the threshold required for later activation and producing a tendency to overreact to stimuli (VanderKolk, 1992)

Characteristics of Resilient Children (Master and Coatsworth, 1998)

Individual
- good intellectual functioning
- appealing, sociable, easygoing disposition
- self-efficacy, self confidence, high self esteem
- talents
- faith

Family
- close relationship to caring parent figure
- authoritative parenting:
- warmth, structure, and high expectations
- socioeconomic advantages
- connections to extended, supportive family network

Extrafamilial context
- bonds to prosocial adults outside of family
- connections to prosocial organizations
- attending effective schools

The Importance of a Good Start

Studies of competence, psychopathology, and resilience all point to the importance of establishing a good start early in development. Children who enter school with significant problems in self-regulation, who are distrustful of

adults, or who have impaired learning abilities have a substantial disadvantage for meeting the developmental tasks of middle childhood. Cascading effects are also suggested by the literature highlighted here.Children who have good internal and external resources tend to get off to a good start in school, become connected to normative peers, maintain positive self-perceptions, and face the developmental tasks of adolescence with the advantages represented by success in these domains. Children who enter school with few resources, cognitive difficulties, and self-regulatory problems often have academic problems, get into trouble with teachers, are more likely to be rejected by peers, and are at risk for disengaging from normative school and peer contexts, which sets them up for considerable difficulty in the transition to adolescence. (Masten and Coatsworth, 1998)

The Critical Period of Infancy

The Child's Evolving Brain

Strategies for Building Competencies:

- Optimal Stimulation: Staying in the Zone
- Accommodating Temperamental Variations
- Active vs Passive Learning
- Expressive vs Receptive Language
- Responsive Environments Mobilize Mastery
- Experimentation Opportunities
- Engaging Consequences
- Enthusiasm for Discovery

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